

## THE LAST DAYS OF RABAUL

(December 13, 1941 to January 23, 1942)

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As I understand it history is a study that should be objective and based on the reported (preferably written) doings and sayings of persons, notable or otherwise, which serve to give us a picture of the past and which, we hope, is in the main correct.

However, to enable the historian to be objective we have in the first place to have the subjective record, oral or written, of the humble reporter of contemporary events.

The events I am now going to relate to you are my own experiences and those of others which I was able to record during the period from December 13, 1941, to January 23, 1942, when the Japanese tide of conquest commenced and began its rapid course towards its flood.

I do not intend to try and set forth before you the overall strategic picture, but will refer to it as necessary to give point to what I am telling you about the investment and capture by the Japanese of Rabaul, which is the locus of my narrative.

For the comments on the Japanese strategy and the pattern of events generally, which were outside our experience at Rabaul, I am indebted to Commander E. A. Feldt, O.B.E., R.A.N., whose book "**The Coast-watchers**" sets forth the position at large, and as regards the South West Pacific in particular, with admirable succinctness and clarity.

Commander Feldt was the Supervising Intelligence Officer, North Eastern Area. As such he was responsible for Naval Intelligence arrangements in North Queensland, Papua, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. He was, himself, based at Townsville, which was also the North Eastern Area Headquarters of the Royal Australian Air Force.

### **Naval Coast Watching Organisation**

Commander Feldt's primary responsibility was the extension and maintenance of the Naval Coast Watching Organisation in the Territories (both Papua and New Guinea) and Solomon Islands. He had to select and appoint personnel, and place teleradios at strategic points so as to establish a reporting screen and communications network effectively covering the northern and north-eastern approaches to Australia, giving warning of any possible impending attack and protecting the country against surprise of any sort in its most vulnerable quarter.

The Naval Coast Watching Organisation was not a new thing. It had had its genesis in 1919. In its broad outline, the scheme provided for the appointment of selected personnel, adjacent to or on the coast, and with means of speedy communication with Navy Office, Melbourne. The Coastwatchers would, in time of war, report instantly any unusual or suspicious happenings in their area, sightings of strange ships or aircraft, floating mines and other matters of defence interest. Appointees included reliable persons such as Postmasters, Police and other Government servants; missionaries at mission stations on little frequented parts of the coast; pilots of civil airlines on or near coastal routes; and in the Territories of Papua and New Guinea and in the British Solomon Islands, Patrol Officers, District Officers and other officials, besides planters.

### **Commander Feldt's Initial Task**

From the time of the outbreak of war with Germany in September, 1939, Commander Feldt had been busy breathing life into the dormant Coastwatching Organisation in the North Eastern Area and extending it as much as funds would permit. The main cost was the provision of Teleradios; the personnel were in the main civilian volunteers who gave their services without payment. Feldt's initial appointment was that of Staff Officer (Intelligence), Port Moresby. His initial task was to put on an operational basis existing coastwatching stations in the Territories of Papua and New Guinea and to decide on additional coastwatching stations which would cover all the sea lanes to Australia from the north east. In 1939 the main concern was with sea approaches but

Feldt was also alive to the importance of air power. As a consequence his coastwatchers were so placed that when the time came, as will be clearly seen from what I have to tell you later, they served the dual role of air watchers as well as coast watchers with great success.

Quite early in the piece Feldt also established a close and harmonious relationship with the Royal Australian Air Force which lasted throughout the war. Credit for this must be shared with the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader (as he was then) J. Alexander, of No. 11 General Reconnaissance, stationed at Port Moresby and also with the Directors of Naval and Air Intelligence in Melbourne who supported the recommendations of their local commanders and gained the approvals of the respective Chiefs of Staff.

### **New Factor in Pacific Strategy**

By the year 1941 it became evident that a new factor would have to be considered in Pacific strategy. Up till then the main menace to the peace of the Pacific had been German Raiders preying on British and allied shipping; however, it became evident that Japan was getting ready to make a major move in the Pacific. Her objective was obscure but South East Asia was regarded as a strong probability in the light of the propaganda she began to disseminate about the Greater East Asia Co. Prosperity Sphere. The big "if" about all this speculation, however, was whether Japan would run the risk of an all out conflict with the United States of America with its strong Pacific Fleet — a matter the Japanese were to resolve in a typically oriental and, we must concede, daring manner.

Early in 1941 Australia began making the dispositions of her forces that were to pertain at the outbreak of the Pacific War. These included the sending of the 8th Division A.I.F. to Malaya and a battalion to Ambon. In the area we are more particularly concerned with, the 2/22 Battalion A.I.F. accompanied by an anti-aircraft detachment, an R.A.A. detachment for fixed defences and Headquarters Troops comprising in all some 1,500 troops were sent to Rabaul. Port Moresby already had a militia battalion, the 9th, a fixed defences detachment of R.A.A. and Headquarters Troops. The Papua-New Guinea Area was constituted the 8th Military District under Brigadier B. Morris as

commandant whilst the Rabaul Garrison was under the command of Colonel J. Scanlan as Area Commander.

The Air Force was moved from Port Moresby to Townsville where an Area Combined Headquarters for the North Eastern Area was constituted. The Air Officer Commanding N.E.A. was Air Commodore F. A. Lukis. Advanced operational Bases (A.O.B.'s) were set up at Port Moresby, Rabaul and Tulagi in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.

The Naval Officer in Charge, Port Moresby, (Cdr. V. C. Eddy, R.N. (Retd.)) was moved to Townsville as N.O.I.C., Townsville, whilst a Junior Officer (Lt. Cdr. A. G. Monteith, R.A.N.R.) was appointed from the Mainland as N.O.I.C., Port Moresby.

Feldt's appointment as S.O. (I) Port Moresby was terminated and he was appointed Supervising Intelligence Officer North Eastern Area with Naval Intelligence Officers serving under him at Port Moresby, Rabaul, Tulagi and, later at Vila in the New Hebrides.

### **The Warden of Wau**

Lieut. H. A. Mackenzie, R.A.N. (Retd.), who like Feldt was an original graduate of the Naval College at Jervis Bay, was the N.I.O. Rabaul. Like Feldt he had left the Navy not long after World War I, but had gone to New Guinea as a trader and planter whereas Feldt had gone into the administration as a Patrol Officer. At the outbreak of war in 1939 Mackenzie had a plantation at Megigi on the North Coast of New Britain, whilst Feldt was a Senior District Officer in the New Guinea Service with the somewhat awe-inspiring title of "Warden of Wau." Mackenzie was appointed assistant S.O. (I), Port Moresby in 1940 which post he held until the reshuffle in 1941.

I was Naval Intelligence Officer, Port Moresby, where I had served in various capacities as rating and officer from September 1939, until May 1941 when I was given my Intelligence appointment.

In November, 1941, a Sub-Lieutenant G. Lockhart was appointed to Rabaul to assist Mackenzie. However, shortly after his arrival in Rabaul he contracted dysentery and was sent to Hospital. (To quote Feldt "There was some talk of his illness being caused by drinking water instead of beer, and so a self-inflicted wound in the eyes of the Islanders" — the seasoned European residents of the Territory). Lock-

hart was sent on a trip round the Group in a Burns Philp ship during his convalescence and was at sea when the Pacific War started. Both the ship and he were ordered to return to Australia, as a sick man would be of no use in Rabaul. You are allowed one guess as to who replaced him.

I spent Sunday December 7, 1941, at Rouna, about 20 miles inland from Port Moresby with some Army Officers inspecting possible communications sites. In the course of our trip there was some speculation as to whether the Japanese were really "cooking up" something. Feldt had told me in August that he thought that if Japan did not move within a month it was unlikely she would enter the war. The Army was divided in its views so the day ended without any positive agreement one way or the other as to what might happen.

### At War with Japan

We knew the next morning — by 7 a.m. someone had picked up a broadcast about the attack on Pearl Harbour. At 7.37 a.m. a signal was received from the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board "Total Japan repeat Total Japan" — this meant we were at war with Japan. Later in the day we heard more about the destruction as an effective offensive force of the United States Pacific Fleet.

That night we had our first casualties of the Pacific War; a Catalina aircraft taking off for a Patrol at 10 p.m. made its take-off run, due to an error, on the wrong side of its flare path and crashed, with the loss of all its crew, on a hilly island called Gemi on the Western side of Port Moresby Harbour. Having been for a night flight in the same aircraft a bare three weeks before I had plenty to reflect on.

Port Moresby began to buzz like a hornet's nest — albeit at that time a very small one. Papua's only resident Japanese — both of them elderly men who had lived at Samarai for years — were interned on December 9. I had met both Tom Tanaka and Mura Kama and whilst I do not think they were part of the Japanese war machine I suppose it was necessary in the interests of national security to intern them, especially as the Japanese had begun bombing Nauru and Ocean Island.

On December 9 Rabaul was subjected to its first aerial inspection by a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft.

### Japanese Capture Tarawa

All trans-Pacific sailings by allied shipping were stopped on December 10 — any ships already at sea were ordered to make for the nearest friendly port. On this day Nauru and Ocean Island were again bombed whilst the Japanese landed in force and captured Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands.

Then on December 11 I received orders to proceed to Rabaul by the first and quickest available means. The R.A.A.F. had nothing going that way so I managed to get a passage in the W.R. Carpenter Airliner departing from Port Moresby at 11 a.m. on December 12. The N.O.I.C. made unhappy noises when he found he had to take on my Intelligence Organisation in Papua until my relief arrived, but he could not “buck” a Naval Board order — much as he would have liked to.

After an afternoon and night spent in Salamaua I arrived in Rabaul at 8.45 a.m. on Saturday, December 13, 1941. Rabaul is situated on Simpson Harbour a vast extinct volcanic crater into which the sea has broken in from the South. On the western side of the Harbour the hills rise steeply from the water's edge. Northward is a small flat widening out from a few hundred yards on the north shore to nearly a mile on the eastern side. A low saddle due north of the Harbour connects the plateau of northern New Britain to the ridge which surrounds the flooded crater. Sweeping east from the saddle the ridge rises to the peak of the North Daughter then trends around southward falling and again rising to the bare kunai-covered slopes of the Mother Mountain, falling and again rising to the South Daughter whose southern edge is washed by the sea at Praed Point. The ridge and peaks form a peninsula which is not ineptly called the Crater Peninsula. In 1941 the only reminder of Rabaul's volcanic past was the single low crater, at the foot of the western side of the South Daughter, known as Matupi, which sighed out smoke, fumes and pumice dust from time to time whilst an occasion guria or earth tremor set everything in Rabaul rattling and shaking for a minute or so at a time.<sup>(1)</sup>

I realise it has taken me some time to get to

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(1) During 1941 Plans had been made for Rabaul to be converted into a huge allied base, but the swiftness of the Japanese advance prevented these plans ever getting beyond the blue print stage.

Rabaul but I consider that what I have already told you was necessary to give point to what I have yet to tell you. Before settling down to the day to day account of the time that Rabaul was to remain in our hands, I must, however, give you a brief account of the dispositions of the opposing forces in the North East Area at the time.

### **Dispositions of Opposing Forces**

The Japanese had made good use of the time between wars and particularly the 1930's to militarise all the former German Island Colonies over which they had been granted mandates. In particular they covered the North East Area with a virtual umbrella of Island bases from the Palau Group in the West to the Marshall's in the East. The capture of Tarawa on December 10, 1941, was achieved to give, in time, protection against any attempt to by-pass the Marshall's to the South of that group. As far as Rabaul was concerned the nearest unpleasant neighbours were Truk, some 700 miles almost due north, and Ponape, about 800 miles North East, in the Carolines. Closer still was the lonely outpost of Kapingamarangi only 320 miles north east of Rabaul.

On our side apart from the Rabaul Garrison, the Army had an Independent Company at Kavieng in the North of New Ireland with platoons at Manus in the Admiralty Islands and Buka Passage at the Northern end of Bougainville.

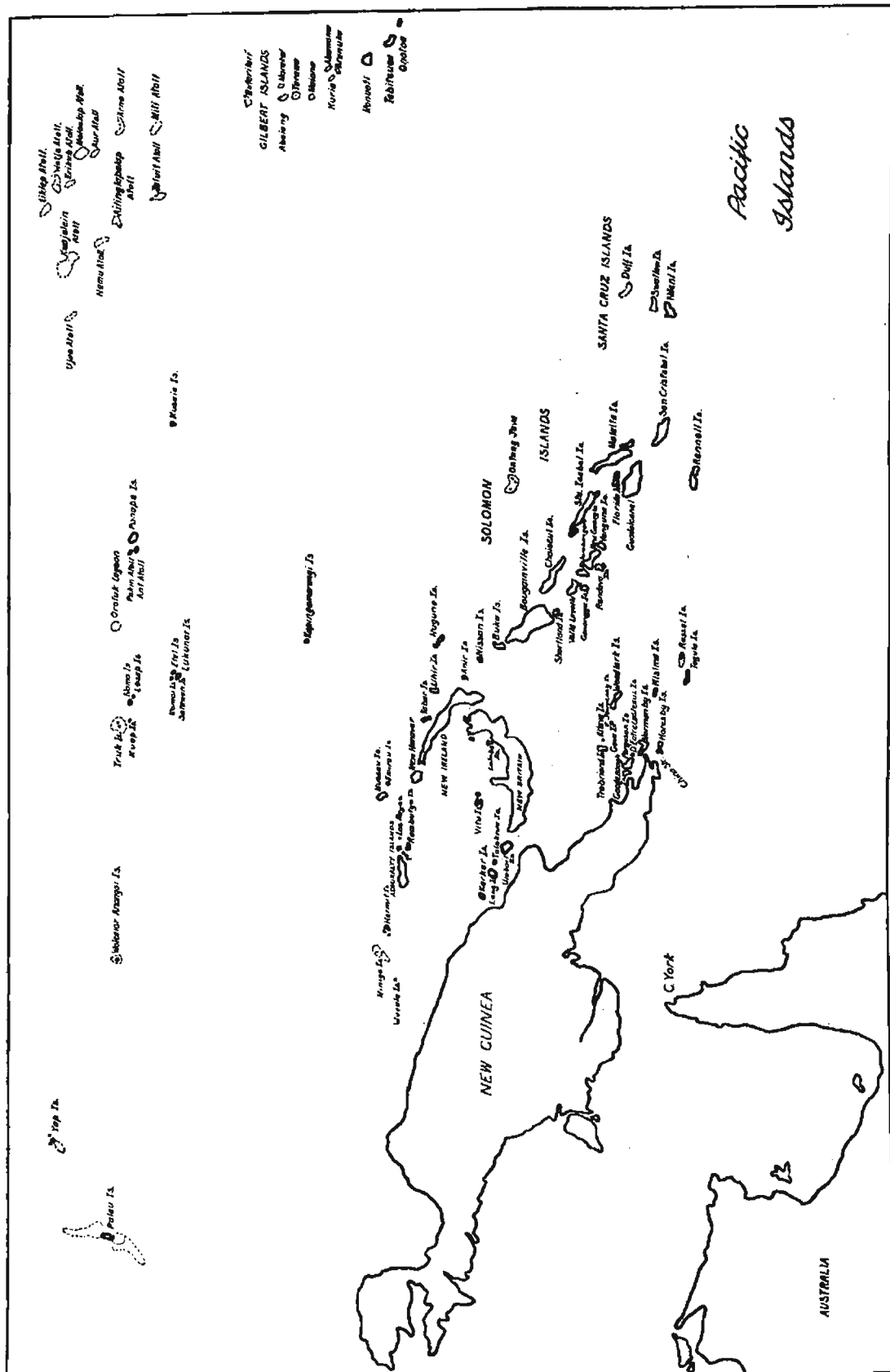
Our coastwatchers, working from West to East, were located at Wuvulu Island, Ninigo, Maron in the Hermit Group, Lorengan on Manus, Emiran North of New Ireland, Kavieng, Tabar East of New Ireland, Namatani on the east coast of central New Ireland, Anir and Nissan in the sea lane between New Ireland and Buka Island and at Kessa on Buka Island. There were numerous others elsewhere in New Britain, New Guinea and the Solomons, but apart from the Coastwatcher at Mioko on Duke of York Island in St. Georges Channel between New Britain and New Ireland, they play no part in this present account.

Our Air Force Bases you already know, with Rabaul, of course, being the vital one in this narrative.

On the day I arrived in Rabaul I found Mackenzie simmering with wrath because the civilian coastwatcher at Maron had evacuated the Island but left his

Teleradio and coastwatching papers behind in his house. The Teleradio was fitted, in addition to its ordinary crystal, with what we called an "X" Crystal which transmitted urgent coastwatching signals on a secret frequency on which a 24-hour watch was kept in both Rabaul and Port Moresby.

Sunday, December 14 was uneventful. On Decem-





ber 15 Mackenzie went to Maron by R.A.A.F. Catalina to recover the Teleradio and papers. During his absence I had to cope with a trans-Pacific refugee, the **Hoegh Silverstar** a Norwegian Ship, which, in a low grade code, announced its expected arrival at Rabaul next morning. With some severity I instructed it to proceed to Port Moresby without delay and to maintain wireless silence. Some hours later the **Hoegh Silverstar** caused quite a flutter for the coastwatcher at Nissan when it hove over the northern horizon. Townsville got quite stirred up too over the Nissan report, as the signal I sent to Naval Board repeated to Townsville and Port Moresby about the **Hoegh Silverstar** somehow did not get to Townsville until hours after the coastwatcher's report had been received there through us at Rabaul.

### First Blow Against Enemy

On this day the North East Area struck its first blow against the enemy — the first operation by either side in the area. A Hudson bomber went to reconnoitre Kapingamarangi where it arrived at 11 a.m. and found a ship unloading there. It got a hot reception with machine gun fire from both ship and shore. At 2 p.m. our striking force — a whole three Hudson Bombers — took off for Kapingamarangi arriving there at 4.30 p.m. The ship was just departing, but the Hudsons failed to register a hit with their 12 x 250 lb. bombs. The aircrews were willing enough, but apparently they found a moving target was not as easy to hit as a fixed target on a bombing range.

December 16 saw the arrival of the first flight of our fighter screen — three Wirraways. The conversion of training aircraft into front line fighters was not calculated to inspire confidence in the Rabaul Garrison which was already starting to feel rather lonely.

On instructions from the Commonwealth Government the Territory Administration issued a compulsory order for the evacuation of all European women and children from the Territory in vessels to be provided. All evacuees had to be in Rabaul by December 20. For the next four or five days there was a constant stream of little ships into Rabaul bringing the women and children in from New Britain, New Ireland, the Admiralties, Buka, Bougainville and all the numerous small islands on which there were plantations. As

usual on such occasions the town took on an air of hectic gaiety, but it was only a mask for the underlying disquiet. For many families the disquiet was not unwarranted. The Commonwealth made no provision for the evacuation of civilian males who were left to shift for themselves. Many never got out and were interned by the Japanese. The bulk of these unfortunates were subsequently lost when the **Monte Video Maru** was torpedoed by a U.S. Submarine off New Ireland some months later. So some of the partings that took place in Rabaul between December 16 and 22 were final.

On December 17 we received word that the Burns Philp vessels **Neptuna** and **Macdhui** were to sail from Port Moresby the following day for Rabaul to take the evacuees to Australia.

### Fighter Screen of Six Wirraways

At 1 p.m. an additional four Wirraways arrived from Lae. We now had a fighter screen of six. A further three straggled in over the next few days. However, the whole nine were never serviceable at the one time — six remained a fair average for fighters available at any given time.

An intelligence signal conveyed the news that the Japanese shipping had all left Tarawa in the Gilberts and was concentrated at Butaritari, the most northerly of the Gilberts, probably because it was a safer anchorage.

We struck again at Kapingamarangi on December 18 when one Hudson went there on an armed reconnaissance. It was over the atoll when attacked by two floatplanes but fought them off, damaging one in the process. It then bombed installations on the atoll, scoring hits in the face of anti-aircraft fire from four to six 3" guns. The captain of the Hudson estimated at least 1,000 personnel on the atoll.

On December 18 and 19 we noted that of nine aircraft sightings, including three by Army personnel near Vunakanau airfield, only two could be identified as friendly. Our Catalina aircraft were patrolling the sea lanes to the north and east almost continuously. These aircraft travelling at their most economical cruising speed of approximately 100 knots, could stay airborne for 16 to 20 hours at a stretch; this made them ideal reconnaissance aircraft. However, as with everything

else, we had too few of them and the aircraft and crews were required to fly so often and for so long that precious engine hours were soon used up and crews completely exhausted. In one classic case a Catalina and crew put in 70 hours on patrols between dawn on Monday and dusk on Friday.

To get back to my narrative, it was reasonable to assume that the Japanese were also patrolling south from Truk and Ponape, and if using flying boats, could use Kapingamarangi as an intermediate refuelling base. This was one of the main reasons for the R.A.A.F.'s attention to this atoll.

### Enemy Air Patrols Step Up

Accordingly, the unidentified aircraft sightings on December 18 and 19 indicated a stepping up in Japanese air patrol activity.

In view of the increase in air sightings both friendly and unidentified, Feldt decreed December 20 that coastwatchers should report sightings of all unrecognised aircraft in plain language. To code reports took too long to get them through to Rabaul.

Townsville somewhat belatedly on December 20 advised all concerned that the sighting originally made by Nissan on December 15 was the **Hoegh Silverstar** and not an enemy armed merchant cruiser as they had first considered it.

The **Macdhui** arrived at 7.45 p.m. on December 20 and the **Neptuna** at 7.45 a.m. on December 21 to embark evacuees from Rabaul. The embarkation was got under way without delay and **Neptuna** sailed at 5.45 p.m. on December 22, whilst **Macdhui** sailed a few hours later at 11 p.m.

With the departure of the women and children, Rabaul lost any semblance of normality it had previously enjoyed. Certainly an additional 57 evacuees arrived in during the next five days and were flown out by civil airline D.C.3's on December 28, but apart from these Rabaul had become a garrison town, and although it had as yet experienced no enemy action the feeling of being beleaguered was there, especially as far stronger British and American defence bastions elsewhere in the Pacific and South East Asia commenced to crumble and fall.

This calls to mind an incident of a week or so earlier when a coastwatching sighting report had somehow found its way to the Commander in Chief, Hongkong, as well as the usual addresses. The C. in C., Hongkong had signalled the N.I.O., Rabaul, as follows:

**"Your signal. I am not concerned."**

When Hongkong shortly after started to catch it hot and strong from the Japanese, Mackenzie was sorely tempted to signal back — **"Your signal of such and such a date. I bet you're concerned now."** However, discretion triumphed over valour.

On December 23 we were most intrigued to hear over Rome Radio's English Broadcast that the Japanese had made a successful attack on British New Guinea. Whilst this report certainly beat the gun, it did indicate that we were evidently included in the Japanese scheme of conquest.

The aircraft sighting reports continued to come in from coastwatchers with a fairly even distribution between friendly and unidentified (enemy).

On Christmas Day, 1941 the R.A.A.F. again attacked Kapingamarangi with two Hudsons. They were in the vicinity of and over the atoll between 10.45 a.m. and 11.35 a.m. They had a brush with two Japanese floatplanes which, however, they succeeded in fighting off and then dropped their bombs, with no observed hits, on the main section of the atoll. They arrived back at Rabaul unscathed (except for a bullet hole in the wing of one Hudson) at 2.5 p.m. At 2.10 p.m. a four engined Japanese flying boat appeared out of a thick bank of cloud flew over Vunakanau airfield at 6,000 feet and disappeared into a cloud bank to the north. It was apparently a reconnaissance aircraft only as it dropped no bombs. All available Wirraways and Hudsons took off in pursuit of it but were unsuccessful in intercepting it.

Boxing Day and December 27 were entirely uneventful.

On December 28 Talasea, in Western New Britain, and Salamaua, Lae and Madang on the New Guinea mainland reported unidentified aircraft; this was probably the same aircraft in each case, having regard to the times of the sightings, and indicated the Japanese

were reconnoitring the other possible New Guinea strongpoints.

### **Plight of Chinese Residents**

With the final clearance of European women and children evacuees it became evident that the Commonwealth Government had no intention of doing anything about Rabaul's Chinese Population. Although China was our ally and had been at war with Japan for a number of years, the Chinese women and children in Rabaul were not evacuated but left to fend for themselves. This caused a good deal of bitterness among the Chinese men, several of whom told me that they would have willingly joined the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, the Territory Militia force, but dared not now that their women and children were to be left to the mercies of the Japanese invaders. During January, 1942, most of the Rabaul Chinese set up camps in the bush outside Rabaul and elsewhere in the Gazelle Peninsula. Whilst their non-interventionist policy saved them from wholesale massacre, they had a hard time under the Japanese regime and many died from disease and ill-treatment.

Jervis, the Coastwatcher at Nissan, reported at 9.39 a.m. on December 29 that he had just got word that a large plane had been down on the water to the west of the island since 6 a.m. A Hudson left at 10.30 a.m. to investigate and arrived at Nissan at 11.10 a.m. After an hour's patrol of the area it made a "Nil sightings" report at 12.53 p.m. and returned to Rabaul. Jervis later reported that as soon as he had sent in his report he had left in his pinnace to investigate. Nissan is an atoll with an interior lagoon and the only entrance on the West. Jervis was located on the eastern side and had to cross the lagoon. He got to the entrance about 11.30 a.m. having sighted the Hudson cruising about, shortly before he got there. The natives informed him that the plane on the water had taken off at 11 a.m. and only just disappeared to the South when the Hudson arrived. There seemed to be little doubt that the plane was a Japanese patrol aircraft that had struck some minor engine trouble, had landed on the calm waters of the ocean, effected repairs and then resumed its patrol. In the equatorial regions the ocean can often be a flat unruffled surface until late morning when the breezes spring up. The Japanese were lucky to be able to take off when they did; a bare

ten minutes later and they would have been at the mercy of the Hudson.

On December 30 the Naval Board advised that on D/F fixes there were at least two Japanese Naval Units in the area between Truk and New Ireland at 11 a.m. on December 29. Kavieng had reported two air-craft to the North and heading west at 1.41 p.m. on December 29. As long range patrol aircraft did not fly in pairs they were probably seaplanes from a seaplane tender or two carrier-borne aircraft brought down from Truk to a point where Northern New Ireland would be within their range.

The last day of 1941 was uneventful.

### **Hudsons Raid Kapingamarangi**

The R.A.A.F. opened 1942 with a raid by four Hudsons on Kapingamarangi at 2 p.m. They were intercepted by one two-seater enemy floatplane only, which they managed to drive off after disabling the observer. They successfully bombed some buildings and set light to two fuel dumps the smoke from which rose to a good 10,000 feet as the Hudsons could still see it when 60 miles on their return journey to Rabaul. Two of the aircraft had been armed with bombs with four second delay fuses. The aircrews were chagrined to see their bombs hit buildings, then bounce through and explode apparently harmlessly in trees 25 to 50 yards from the targets. The other aircraft with bombs with instantaneous fuses were the ones that achieved the results.

Otherwise New Year's Day 1942 was quiet, whilst nothing of any moment occurred on January 2 either. It was, however, only the calm before the storm.

At 4.20 a.m. on January 3, three Hudsons again raided Kapingamarangi. This time they hit and destroyed a twin float biplane on a slipway. They also started four large fires which were still burning at 5 a.m. as the Hudsons were flying back to Rabaul where they arrived safely at 7.30 a.m. The Japanese were evidently taken by surprise as although the Hudsons sighted three aircraft on the water or the slipways none took off and only one machine gun was observed to be firing at them. You will have noticed how the Hudson's bombing prowess was improving with practice. Also the R.A.A.F. were now arming all aircraft with instantaneous fused bombs and thus

avoiding having bombs hit a target and bounce off before exploding comparatively harmlessly some distance away.

At 8.36 a.m. on January 4, McDonald, the District Officer and coastwatcher at Kavieng reported a single aircraft southbound. We could not identify it and at 9.43 a.m. a twin-engined Japanese bomber flew over Rabaul and off to the north again, before it could be intercepted by any of our aircraft which took to the air for this purpose.

At 10 a.m., Page, the coastwatcher at Tabar, reported he had heard aircraft passing south but too far off to sight. By this time the Wirraways and Hudsons were coming into refuel after their fruitless chase of the reconnaissance aircraft.

### **First Japanese Raid**

About 10.15 I left the Naval Staff Office per bicycle to see the Air Force Intelligence Officer at the A.O.B. on the shore of the Harbour about a quarter of a mile away. On arrival there I found Robinson the Intelligence Officer in the process of handing over to Manifold, his successor, who had just arrived. They said they would not be long so I elected to wait as the matters I wanted to discuss were fairly urgent. I went on to the western side of the A.O.B. Building and sat on the landing rail looking roughly north-west and talked to an air force clerk who was sitting on the steps repairing a portable typewriter. Time passed and shortly before 10.40 a.m. I heard the sound of aircraft somewhere in the north-west behind a bank of cloud. I said to the airman "We have not got any kites up at present, have we?" He said "I don't think so and I don't know of any expected fresh arrivals." I decided I had better break in on Robinson and Manifold and slipped off the rail to do so when, to my amazement and horror, 16 large aircraft popped over the edge of the cloud bank I had been watching. I yelled to Robinson and Manifold and they darted out of the Intelligence Office, took one look and darted back to the telephones. I went with them, contacted the Naval Office on the direct line and found Mackenzie had just seen the aircraft himself.

I decided my duty lay at the Naval Office, hopped on to my bicycle and got going. I am sure I would have qualified for Olympic Honours for the 400 metres

dash on a bicycle during that hectic ride, which all the same seemed interminable. I was riding towards the aircraft during most of the journey and I am sure my eyes grew stalks like a crab's—one watching the road and one the aircraft which seemed stuck in the sky just ahead of me. I arrived at the front of the Central Administration Building where our office was, fell off the bicycle, darted up the steps and found Mackenzie on his own. He had sent the four ratings on duty outside to the slit trenches on the lawn behind the building. Just then the building rocked to a series of resounding explosions in the vicinity of Lakunai Airfield about a quarter of a mile away. The aircraft made the one run only and disappeared to the south-east where they no doubt turned over St. George's Channel and made their way back to Truk.

We found that not more than 16 bombs had been dropped. They were of the anti-personnel variety, not unlike shrapnel shells. They had fallen south east of Lakunai close to the Native Hospital, causing 30 casualties among natives who had gathered to watch the aircraft, but otherwise no damage. It was ironical that the native casualties included 11 Papuans from Gawa Island who had been rescued only two days before from a canoe that had been caught in a squall in October 1941, lost mast and sail, and had been drifting north-east ever since. Their cargo of coconuts was all they had to subsist on, and five had died from their privations before the remaining 11 had been rescued off Metlik on the New Ireland coast.

As I have said earlier all our aircraft that were serviceable were being refuelled so we had no attempt at interception of the raiders. Our A/A battery of two 3" guns, both of which had defective sights, got off a few rounds but without effect.

### More Raiders Arrive

At 6.8 p.m. Page of Tabar came on the air again to report 11 large aircraft southbound. By the time the raiders arrived over Rabaul it was dark and needless to say our blackout was wellnigh 100 per cent. perfect. A small inter-island vessel, the **Duranbah**, arrived from Pondo at 6.52 p.m. and immediately it got into Simpson's Harbour lit up like the proverbial ship at sea. Signal lamps flashed madly from all directions and once the captain got the idea about an air raid



being due in about 5 minutes, the **Duranbah** literally went out like a light and hove to in midharbour.

At 7.1 p.m. the raiders arrived. For 11 aircraft they made an incredible amount of noise and we realised that they must be four-engined and probably giant Kawanisi Flying Boats which combined the best qualities of the Sunderland and the Catalina, as well as being armed with 20 millimetre cannon and .5 machine guns.

They droned around for the next ten minutes and finally appeared to line up south of Vunakanau airfield and then made their bombing run. However, it was too dark for success and although they dropped 100 bombs, the size of which payload confirmed that they were Kawanisis, the nearest to Vunakanau was half-a-mile distant and the only casualty was one native who had the misfortune to be walking along a track in the area at the time the bombs fell.

Thus Rabaul had its baptism of fire and shots fired in anger.

On January 5 Page of Tabar again reported, at 9.7 a.m., a distant sound of aircraft southbound. At 10.34 a.m. Army personnel at Kokopo reported two aircraft proceeding towards Rabaul. Due to cloudy conditions the aircraft were not sighted, but were probably reconnaissance aircraft endeavouring to ascertain the damage done by the previous day's raids.

### Interrupted Haircuts

January 6 was uneventful and at 5 p.m. Mackenzie got one of the local barbers to call and we all had much needed haircuts. The ratings on duty were done then I had mine. Mackenzie had just sat down and had had the initial runover with the clippers when at 5.55 p.m. Allen, the coastwatcher at Mioko in the Duke of Yorks in St. George's Channel reported eight large aircraft proceeding towards Rabaul. The barbering stopped abruptly. After telephoning the warning to Army and Air Force that raiders would be over the town in about five minutes, Mackenzie, the Yeoman of Signals, Knight, and I joined the ratings and barber on the back lawn. I might mention that the Burns Philp vessel **Malaita** of some 4,000 tons at exactly 6 p.m., entered Simpson's Harbour, followed two minutes later by the small inter-island vessel **Mako** of some 300 tons. At 6.2 p.m. nine Kawanisi Flying boats came into sight

over the Mother Mountain, proceeded West in V formation across the Harbour, turned in a southerly direction and dropped their load on Vunakanau at 6.7 p.m. Our A/A guns blazed away but all rounds fired burst short. The Air Force had no time to get aircraft up. The enemy formation after it had dropped its bombs swung in a long arc through east and passed again over the town and Harbour at 6.14 p.m. and left on a north-westerly course disappearing from view at 6.25 p.m. Two Wirraways finally got off from Lakunai but had not the speed to catch up with the raiders.

At Vunakanau half the airfield was put out of commission temporarily but enough was left for Hudsons and Wirraways to use. One Wirraway was destroyed by a direct hit from one of the 72 bombs the raiders dropped.

At 6.30 p.m. the imperturbable Mackenzie resumed having his hair cut without further interruption.

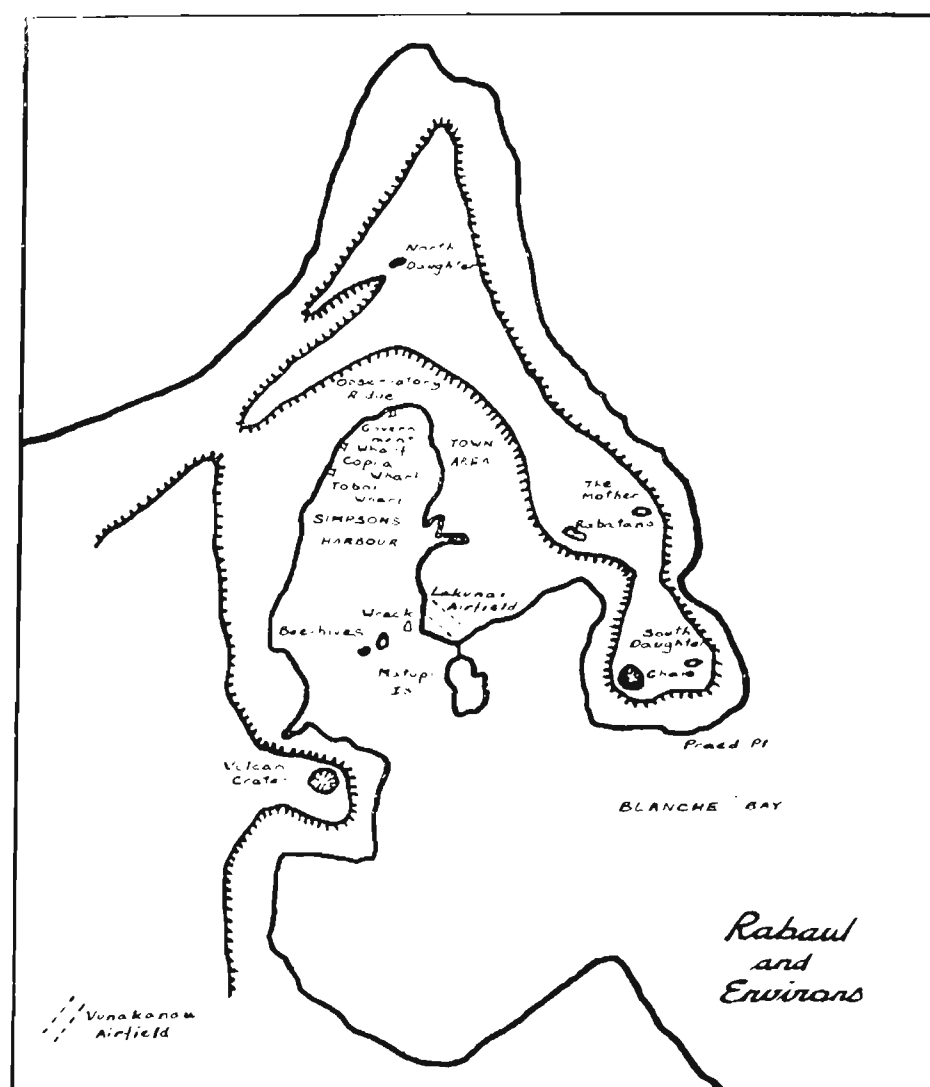
At 7.29 p.m. McDonald of Kavieng reported the raiders homeward bound to Truk. He caused some alarm at first as he first heard them in the south and reported them going in that direction. However, a few minutes later he corrected this.

As I have said earlier, big things had been intended for Rabaul, but the swiftness of the Japanese advance threw out the Allies' calculations. We got a clear indication that we had been given away by the Commonwealth when orders were received that a large cargo of boom defence gear in the **Malaita** was not to be unloaded but returned to Australia in the ship which sailed for Sydney at 6.15 p.m. on January 8.

### **Hudsons Retaliate**

On January 7 two Hudsons left Rabaul at 3 a.m. and attacked Kapingamarangi at 5.30 a.m. They destroyed a slipped seaplane and heavy A/A tracer machine gun fire ceased after the aircraft dropped their bombs. Both aircraft returned safely to Rabaul at 8.44 a.m. At 10.30 a.m. Page of Tabar reported aircraft on a southerly course. Allen of Mioko reported them at 10.58 a.m. At 11.2 a.m. 18 enemy aircraft were sighted over Rabaul and dropped 78 bombs on Vunakanau a few minutes later. This time they really hurt us—the Hudsons which had carried out the raid earlier in the day were being serviced and another was being readied for a patrol. One was entirely

destroyed and the other two damaged, one badly but not beyond repair. A Wirraway was also damaged as were some of the airfield buildings. The enemy aircraft were twin-engined bombers and faster than the big flying boats. Previous raids had been made at heights of between 8,000 to 12,000 feet, but this was a true pattern bombing raid from 18,000 feet. The raiders departed at 11.16 a.m. on a N.N.W. course but evidently changed course a little as Tabar sighted them at 11.54 a.m. homeward bound to Truk.



Rabaul and Environs.

On January 8 Mioko reported a single aircraft bound for Rabaul at 10.17 a.m. At 10.23 a.m. this aircraft was sighted at about 15,000 feet over Vunakanau. Five Wirraways took off from Lakunai but failed to intercept. This was obviously a photo reconnaissance aircraft and was sighted by Kavieng at 11.16 a.m. northbound.

At 6.2 p.m. on the same day Tabar reported the noise of distant aircraft proceeding south. Rabaul

was completely cloud-covered at the time and no hostile aircraft materialised. They may have turned back or it could have been a patrol which usually passed Tabar about this time. Page had some evenings earlier actually seen the patrol aircraft turn onto the next leg of its course to the north-east in the general direction of Ponape.

### Japanese Patrol Activity

On January 9 there was a marked increase in Japanese patrol activity. Apart from Tabar, Buka Passage and Kieta in Bougainville reported sightings, whilst Tulagi was circled twice by a Kawanisi flying boat.

On January 10 Goode, the coastwatcher at Kessa on Buka Island, reported six aircraft flying south at 1.33 p.m. Buka Passage also reported through Read the coastwatcher there that six planes had been sighted which however turned north at 2.2 p.m. The planes were not ours and apparently the Japanese were making reconnaissance flights in force with seaplanes or carrier aircraft.

The R.A.A.F. decided to make Kavieng and Lorenga in the Admiralties forward operational bases and on January 11 arranged for fuel and oil stocks to be available at those places. On January 12 a Hudson was despatched from Port Moresby to Kavieng. The Air Force also advised that any dusk sightings by the coastwatcher at Emirau Island could be our own aircraft on a secret operation. They were in fact going to try and bomb Truk with Catalinas on the night of January 12/13, but weather prevented the aircraft getting anywhere near Truk.

During January 13 and 14 the air seemed to be full of Catalinas coming and going although there were only six of them involved. Enemy sightings tailed off until January 16.

On January 15 the Norwegian vessel **Herstein** arrived from Port Moresby with equipment for the Army including anti-tank guns, but with only limited supplies of ammunition for the same. **Herstein** was to load 6,100 tons of copra before being despatched to Australia.

### Catalinas Raid Truk

The Air Force by scratching the bottom of the barrel, got eight Catalinas together to bomb Truk. The

aircraft left Kavieng at 6 p.m. on January 15 but one crashed on take-off with the loss of its whole crew. The remaining aircraft met shocking weather just north of the Equator and only one (A24/14 - Flight Lieut. Purton) succeeded in breaking through and arrived over the target at 2 a.m. on January 16. It was there for 50 minutes. It dropped two sticks of 8 x 250 lb. bombs from 6,500 feet on East, West runs and saw the flashes of all bombs dropped. Closer observation was impossible on account of cloud. The Japanese must have felt fairly secure at Truk as the blackout on the islands in the atoll was not complete and numerous small lights were observed. The ground defences both A/A and searchlights were slow to open up and when they did they under-ranged the aircraft. No enemy air activity was observed.

This was the first and last occasion on which the North East Area managed to get an aircraft through to Truk.

On the morning of January 16 the air was again full of Catalinas returning from the Truk operation. It was also full of less friendly aircraft. Tabar reported an aircraft at 6.18 a.m. on a S.W. course and at 10.38 a.m. an enemy aircraft flew over Rabaul and off to the N.N.W. at a great height.

At 11.34 a.m. Kavieng reported one southbound aircraft. At 12.2 p.m. Mioko reported 20 aircraft heading towards Rabaul. They were sighted to the south-east at 12.10 and bombed the S.E. end of Vunakanau from 12,000 feet at 12.13, fortunately doing only small damage. At 12.52 Tabar reported the raiders homeward bound.

Reports come in from Wau between 10 and 10.30 a.m., Madang at 11 a.m. and Kavieng at 2.14 p.m. of a four-engined aircraft — probably the same aircraft carrying out a reconnaissance and homeward bound when sighted at Kavieng.

### **Raiders Drop 40 Bombs**

Then at 5.30 p.m. Kavieng reported five aircraft flying south. At 6.35 p.m. the raiders appeared over Rabaul from the N.N.E. and dropped about 40 bombs near Lakunai without damage. The A/A fire was much closer this time and loosened up the raiders tight V formation considerably which prevented precision bombing. The raiders were again Kawanisis and flew off to the N.E. at 6.40 p.m. They did not linger. We

had no steel helmets and when some pieces of shrapnel from the A/A shells thudded down nearby we hurriedly got hold of some lead covered code books and held those on our heads for protection.

Instructions were received from Feldt to endeavour to have a coastwatcher placed on the east coast of New Ireland at the position where the raiders crossed it. This would give more warning of raids than that we received from Mioko only. It was a good thought but our time was running out too fast for it to be implemented.

On January 17 two Hudsons from Kavieng attacked a 6,000 ton Japanese ship at Kapingamarangi at 1.30 p.m. They dropped eight bombs but scored no hits. They saw a number of floatplanes in the lagoon which apparently took off after them because when they arrived back at Kavieng at 3.40 p.m. they reported pursuit by six planes and took off again for Rabaul at 3.45. However, the enemy planes did not arrive at Kavieng. They must have had to turn back as it was beyond their range.

At about 2 p.m. a Wirraway from Kavieng had attacked a Kawanisi flying boat until forced to break off the action for lack of ammunition. It reported no visible result, which was hardly surprising. Unless hit in a vital part or the pilots killed, a Kawanisi could absorb a lot of .303 machine gun fire and still get back to its base.

On January 18 the R.A.A.F. made its last attack on Kapingamarangi. Two Hudsons made the raid and destroyed one plane and launch, with two launches off the jetties probably sunk. No large ships were seen.

On both January 18 and 19 there was only the usual enemy reconnaissance and our own.

### **Coast Defence Battery**

I have not said much about the Army up to the present as their role apart from the A/A Battery had been so far an inactive one. During their months in Rabaul however, they had established a coast defence battery at Praed Point with two obsolescent 6" naval guns. Roads leading into the Town had had tank traps constructed on them and strong posts had been built at suitable points. They even had constructed a strong concrete dugout as a Command Post for the area. The one weakness in all they had done was that they had a bare 1,500 troops to defend the coastline of

the Crater Peninsula (a good 20 miles) and the shores of Simpson Harbour (close on another 15 miles). If the coast defence guns were not harmed they could defend the town and harbour; but lacking the guns the town and harbour became indefensible. As Secretary of the Inter-Service Committee at Port Moresby, I had six months previously prepared a plan for the denial of port installations and facilities in the Territories to an enemy. The Commandant 8 M.D. when he read the plan scoffed at it. He told me I had been reading too much about the Russian "scorched earth" policy. His idea was that if, say, the Japanese did take Rabaul we might take it back in a matter of weeks and would need the installations I was proposing to destroy so the enemy could not have them. When I said I hoped that the hypothetical enemy would have the same views when it came his turn to lose the installation, I really got a "ticking off." In consequence, there was no plan to destroy Rabaul before an invader got it. Whilst Mackenzie and I had other fish to fry, we were sorely tempted when the need arose to go round setting a torch to Rabaul, but were both a bit scared of Feldt's reaction, for as far as he was concerned we had to attempt a definite objective with no side issues allowed.

To get back to the Army. By January 19, 1942, they knew they could expect no help. It was known by then that the "Brisbane Line" had been decided on by the Commonwealth Government, and that there were actually 30 "Kittyhawk" fighters in Brisbane with more becoming available. In the meantime, Malaya and the Philippines were in desperate straits from lack of airpower, but at least they had something better than Wirraways.

### A Sorry Muddle

As far as the fate of the garrison was concerned the policymakers vacillated from holding Rabaul to the last man to evacuation and back again. They even considered guerilla warfare in the jungles of the Gazelle Peninsula, quite overlooking the fact that there was no provision at all made for this. In the end, they decided to contest the western shore of the Harbour so the troops retreat would not be cut off. They did not apparently consider just where the troops would retreat to when the Japanese bundled them off the western shore of the Harbour. The civil population, or those of them who were lucky enough to

receive any instructions, was told to get out of the town for the battle. All told, it was a sorry muddle, with the 1,500 troops about to be sacrificed on the altar of political ineptitude.

Then it was the morning of Tuesday, January 20, 1942. As the reporting centre for the Territory of New Guinea Coastwatching network, we were having a busy time as Japanese reconnaissance aircraft were inordinately active over New Ireland, Buka, the Admiralties and the New Guinea mainland from Wewak to Salamaua. Reports came in with monotonous regularity. Mackenzie and I did nothing else but pass reports to Army and Air Force Headquarters and draw up signals for passing onto Naval Authorities at Port Moresby and on the mainland of Australia. All seven communications ratings on the staff were on duty coding these signals, but even then they were banking up as the reports continued to flow in.

As the morning progressed, everybody started to feel that some significant move was afoot on the part of the enemy, but no one realised how quickly it would materialise.

The first indication came at 12.10 p.m. when Page at Tabar reported a large number of aircraft had passed his island on a S.W. course, but they had been too far off to tell how many. It was apparent then that an air raid was in store for us, but air raids by now had more or less become a matter of routine, and local Army, Air Force and Civil Defence Authorities, having been advised to expect a raid by the end of the next half-hour, a signal was prepared for despatch to other Naval Authorities before the raid commenced. One or other of the coastwatchers on the track taken by the enemy aircraft had given warning of every one of the six preceding raids and experience had quickly shown what time would elapse between the various warnings and the advent of the raiders over Rabaul.

### **No Ordinary Hit and Run Raid**

Ten minutes after the first report there came the first indication that this was to be no ordinary hit and run raid.

District Officer Kyle, the coastwatcher at Namatanai, reported upwards of 50 aircraft had passed the New Ireland coast on a S.W. course. It was apparent



that Rabaul was in for a heavy plastering by the enemy but, in view of the fact that up to 20 aircraft had been employed in previous raids and only one of the two airfields had been attacked on each occasion, it seemed that it was intended to attack both Lakunai and Vunakanau airfields simultaneously on this occasion.

On the first warning being received, the R.A.A.F. had put its total serviceable fighter strength — the famous six Wirraways — into the air and by 12.30 p.m. the Wirraways were patrolling at 10,000 feet over the volcano, Matupi, at the entrance to the harbour.

### Sky Filled with Aircraft

At 12.35 p.m. the coastwatcher at Mioko in the Duke of York Islands reported the sky was filled with aircraft — a minute or two later he reported over 100. The alarm had been sounded on his first report, and on his rough count being received the ominous nature of the raid was fully realised; the Japanese evidently aimed at inflicting a crushing blow. The other raids had been tests of strength, but this one was to mark the commencement of a softening up process.

Mackenzie and I had by this time organised observation points for the ratings and ourselves along the 150-yard line between the harbour and the staff office, which gave us collectively an all-round view of the town, the Lakunai airfield and the harbour areas, whilst the plateau where Vunakanau airfield lay was visible to all. Suddenly one of the coders called out that there appeared to be a dogfight in progress over Matupi. Where the six Wirraways had been there were now 30 to 40 aircraft weaving wildly — all of them single-engined. The Japanese had brought their Zero fighters with them, and the only possible explanation was that they had a carrier lurking off the east coast of New Ireland. An enemy carrier had been reported some days previously as leaving the Marshalls for the Truk area, but it was now apparent what its real destination was, and the intensive reconnaissance activity by the enemy was also explained. They had to be sure that there was nothing in the area that could strike back at the carrier.

The Wirraways never had a chance — two of them were shot down in as many minutes and the rest

just brushed aside, more or less contemptuously, as the Zeros went on to ground strafe the two airfields.

At that moment, however, from all four points of the compass, 72 heavy bombers arrived in four formations, each at a slightly different level and the highest formation at no greater height than 6,000 feet. The formations from the east and west, respectively, lined up and commenced a series of runs over Vunakana, the formation from the north swung round through the west and commenced a run to the east over Lakunai, whilst the last formation kept on its northerly course and headed straight for the town!

### Wirraways Attack Bombers

The four Wirraways seemed to realise the hopelessness of chasing the Zeros and, breaking their own formation, a Wirraway gallantly headed in the direction of each formation of bombers. The formations over the airfields had released their bombs and the punctuated roar of the explosions made the whole area tremble. The formation headed for the town let its bombs go and its target became clear—the valueless hulk **Westralia** in which a local shipping company had previously stored coal and which was now lying on the northern side of the harbour waiting to be towed out to sea and scuttled, as it had been dragging its anchors and menacing the Catalina moorings. The Japanese were welcome to send down all the bombs they liked at **Westralia** in its conspicuous anchorage and it was hoped they would thereby miss seeing the fast modern 7,000 ton motor vessel **Herstein**, inconspicuously berthed at the copra wharf on the north-west side of the harbour—a hope, however, that was not to be realised.

The garrison's two 3-inch anti-aircraft guns, with their defective sights, had opened fire from Observatory Ridge as each formation came in range and were commencing to close their targets as the necessary adjustments were made in sighting.

### A Bomber Shot Down

The Wirraways continued to harass the bomber foundations and, as the formation over Lakunai came sliding back from the east to make its second run, the ack-ack scored a hit on a bomber near the head of the formation. It plunged out of line, but recovered and

then headed off to the north. The attendant Wirraway seized its opportunity and, diving on the injured bomber, inexorably began to ride it down. The bomber pilot struggled to keep his altitude, but his plane had become an easy mark, even for a Wirraway's two .303 machine guns. Fatally hit at last, the bomber failed to clear the looming bulk of the Mother Mountain and, as it crashed, its remaining bombs went off in a sheet of flame.

The formation attending to the **Westralia** commenced its second run, this time from the north. Even as its bombs whistled over the Naval Staff Office towards their target, disaster befell the lone Wirraway which had been darting in and out of the formation in a fruitless effort to break or divert it. By some mischance, the slow-moving fighter came into the field of fire of the rear gunners, so it seemed, of all 18 bombers and literally disintegrated in the air.

The Zeros had finished their strafing runs over the airfields and were now roaming at will over the whole area. Four of them attempted to attack the ack-ack positions, but heavy machine gun fire from the protective positions around the guns drove them off, despite several attempts to knock the gun crews out, including blind zooming attacks from behind the spur of the North Daughter to the rear of the gun positions.

The remaining Wirraways were now practically at the limit of their endurance and, after further brushes with the Zeros, two of them managed to make Vunakanau, but were followed in and strafed. The crews escaped, but one aircraft was destroyed and the other rendered temporarily unserviceable.

### **Dive Bombers Arrive**

The time was now 1.10 p.m. and all the heavy bombers were making their last runs while the Zeros began to form up in patrols above them. Suddenly, a single-engined aircraft came in over the town from the North at a little more than 1,500 feet. It was directly over the Naval Staff Office when it executed a peel off turn and screamed down in a steep dive towards **Herstein** — the dive bombers had arrived. It was followed in quick succession by two others, while three more came from the north-west and commenced to attack **Westralia**, still unhit and afloat after being at the receiving end of seventy-two 500 lb. bombs. A

further three dive bombers came in over Lakunai and accounted for the last Wirraway, which had just come in to refuel, with a direct hit. Three more could be seen attacking installations at Vunakanau.

Each dive bomber carried two 500 lb. bombs and the six attacks on **Herstein** left the ship and her cargo of copra ablaze. The ack-ack, in a vain attempt to beat off the dive bombers from the ship, were firing on a flat trajectory from their hilltop. They had bagged another two heavy bombers, but found firing at dive bombers over open sights was just a bit too tricky to give them further successes.

Despite the six attacks on **Westralia**, she did not burn and remained afloat for nearly an hour after the attack had finished.

At 1.25 p.m. the dive bombers and their Zero escort formed up in a leisurely manner over the town and flew off to the north-east to rejoin their carrier. The raid was over.

Despite their limitations, the Wirriways had accounted for two other heavy bombers, besides the one brought down in conjunction with the ack-ack. It was a noble effort on their part and well merits its place with the other great, forlorn hopes of the war.

Strenuous efforts were made to save **Herstein**, but, as the copra wharf was ablaze too, this fire had to be subdued before the fires on the ship could be got at. As night fell, the ship's mooring lines parted and, drifting before a light north-west breeze, she came like a slow-moving beacon across the harbour and grounded gently on a reef within fifty yards of the spot where **Westralia** had gone down. By the next morning she was completely gutted, but sitting firmly on the reef. Even as a dead ship **Herstein** continued to serve the Allied cause. When the Japanese took Rabaul, they left the burnt-out hulk where it was for many months. During that time **Herstein** was the yardstick by which the photographic interpretation branch of the Allied Air Forces measured the dimensions and calculated the tonnage of every Japanese vessel disclosed by photographic reconnaissance as among those present in Rabaul Harbour — information of no small value when it came to assessing the significance of enemy shipping concentrations there.

### Insufficient Air Strength

Although the coastwatching organisation had given valuable warnings of the raid in its impending stages, there was, unfortunately, insufficient air strength to enable the fullest possible advantage to be taken of the information thus received. The time was to come, however, when similar warnings were to cost the Japanese many times the number of aircraft they had used on this occasion — over Guadalcanal, for instance, when they lost upwards of 800 aircraft at the rate of nearly one an hour. Rabaul, though too weak to defend itself, had proved that the idea that the element of surprise could be taken from air attacks in a Pacific war was correct. It remained for growing Allied strength to give the idea its practical application.

To cap the disasters of the day, a Hudson failed to arrive at Rabaul and was presumed lost at sea. It may have had the misfortune to run into the Zeros. We shall never know.

Having once put the pressure on, the Japanese kept it up on January 21. There was intensive reconnaissance as on the previous day. Salamaua, Lae and Madang on the New Guinea mainland were bombed as also was Kavieng. Lorengan on Manus in the Admiralties was strafed by machine guns and cannon.

### Enemy Cruisers Sighted

Then at 2.31 p.m. a Hudson on patrol sighted four enemy cruisers 140 miles N.W. of Rabaul and steaming towards us. It was evident that we could anticipate, if not a landing, at least a naval bombardment before we were much older. The raid on January 20 had disclosed that beyond doubt we had no air umbrella and lay open to attacks from sea and air.

The time had come for Mackenzie to make and carry out one of the big decisions that a Naval Officer may have to face in time of war.

The laws of the Navy are many and varied—some, certainly, permit of being honoured in the breach rather than in the observance, but there are others which must be obeyed in the face of all dangers, hardships and obstacles. Such a one is the rule that secret and confidential documents must be destroyed at all costs to prevent their falling into the hands of an enemy. The compromising of a code may endanger the

movements and plans of a fleet or convoy before the necessary warning of the compromise can be issued. The war against Germany and Japan showed, on a number of occasions, that Naval Shore Staffs might, with the best will in the world, have arrangements on hand to destroy their "C.Bs." (secret and confidential books) but that they tended to overlook one vital factor — time. "C.Bs." are usually stoutly constructed with lead weighted covers to hasten their descent to the ocean bed in the event of risk of capture afloat, but when it comes to destroying by fire ashore, it is a long job, even with the help of combustibles, such as petrol or kerosene.

### **Destruction of Documents**

When the Japanese advance to the south in 1942 was rolling on and seemingly unstoppable, the Admiralty was gravely concerned over the possible compromise of "C.Bs." and informed all Stations that their destruction must be accomplished at all costs to avoid capture by the enemy. The Australian Commonwealth Naval Board, in its turn, passed the instruction to all Naval Authorities on the Australia Station, but fortunately the instruction never had to be implemented on his Station, save in one instance — Rabaul.

Normally, we would have had very few "C.Bs.", but pre-Pearl Harbour, the powers that be with the great things they had in view for Rabaul had, before anything else had passed the blue print stage, commenced building up the "C.B." establishment until Mackenzie was, by the time of the outbreak of the Pacific War, the custodian of a quantity and quality of "C.Bs." such as is usually found only in a port where there is a full Naval Staff headed by a Naval Officer in Charge of at least Commander's rank.

### **Rabaul Out On A Limb**

When the Japanese started to favour Rabaul with their attention, Mackenzie had a large trench dug outside the back of the Staff Office and cached half-a-dozen four gallon tins of petrol close by. It was apparent that Rabaul was out on a limb. The time that must elapse before it was lopped off as another Japanese conquest was entirely up to the Japanese themselves.

At 4 p.m. Mackenzie and I commenced to burn our "C.Bs." A roaring fire was kindled in the trench with

the aid of the petrol and some dismembered packing cases. The first book was ripped apart and its leaves ceremonially consigned to the flames. Then for the next seven hours we carried on with the job of tearing up books and documents and feeding the fire with them. Some of the basic code books, with the lead weighted covers referred to, turned out to be so stoutly built that they had to be chopped and cut apart with a tomahawk. There was no doubt that they were meant to stay on the sea-bottom once they reached it — the risk of pages coming loose was negligible.

By 11 p.m. only one current code remained undestroyed and it was decided to retain this for a while, as it would not take overlong to destroy it and it could be used as long as W/T communication through Rabaul Radio (VJZ) remained open. However, by 4 a.m. on January 22 the Army had decided not to defend the town and the troops began to move to their positions on the western side of the harbour.

Figgis, the M.I.O., told Mackenzie that the early destruction of the W/T Station was also ordered. Mackenzie had his last signal announcing the destruction of the "C.Bs." coded up for transmission and then the remaining code was destroyed.

### **Appeal to Enemy Curiosity**

Mackenzie and I were looking at the empty safes after the destruction of the books when we decided it was rather tame to leave them as they were — things ought to be made interesting for the Japanese. We had no materials for booby traps, but decided an appeal to enemy curiosity could be just as annoying. Reams of unused stationery, lead bars used as paper weights and even humble boulders were crammed into the safes until they were filled to bursting point. The doors were then locked and the keys subsequently consigned to the bottom of the harbour. No doubt the Japanese, after they had moved in during the early hours of January 23, spent a busy day blowing all the safes open to make certain they contained nothing of value. It must have been irritating, to say the least, for the enemy when each time a safe was opened a mass of rubbish came before their gaze. They must have realised then the significance of the nearby trench, full of sifted ashes, from which they had no chance of obtaining any information at all. The "C.Bs." were safe from any possibility of compromise.

At 2 a.m. on January 22, Mackenzie sent me with two ratings and an N.G.V.R. private named Stone, who had until a few hours before been an A.W.A. Radio Station Operator, to Toma on a mountain ridge south of Vunakanau to pick up our teleradio and stores. We commandeered a car that turned out to have a badly worn clutch. As we crawled up hills with engine roaring we nearly frightened the wits out of several army posts, especially where we had come down a rise comparatively silently before hitting the next slope. I found out later from Mackenzie that in the pre-dawn hour the Army posts near Vunakanau kept reporting the sound of aircraft whilst all the time it had been our wretched car. It was a still, windless night and the ridges amplified the noise we made.

We crossed the Vunakanau airfield at first light. The last Hudson was just taking off for Port Moresby whilst the ground staff had already commenced their long ride and walk to Wide Bay where they had to be by the evening of January 23 to be picked up by Catalinas and flown out to Port Moresby.

We eventually crawled into Toma at 6.30 a.m. on January 22 — four and a-half hours for a trip that should have taken us only two hours at the most, even allowing for the strange road and the fact that we could only use parking lights.

No attacks had been made so far on the two 6" guns at Praed Point, but there could be no doubt that the enemy knew they were there, for the raw scars left on the point as a result of the installation of the guns were plainly visible from the air. It seemed that it was intended to first silence the guns by bombardment from the sea, with the assistance, perhaps, of an air attack, and then to make a landing at will.

### Concentrating Defence

As their fixed defences were still intact, the Army, as I have said, was inclined to consider a last ditch defence of Rabaul and the Crater Peninsula, but, as this course would render it easy for any larger force to contain the troops in the Peninsula and then break them from the air, they ultimately decided to concentrate on the defence of the western side of Simpson's Harbour and to maintain a tenuous patrol link with the fixed defences for as long as was possible or necessary, according to the tactics employed by the enemy.



As no air attacks had materialised on January 21, aerial support for any sea bombardment on January 22 became a certainty.

The wary Japanese, however, were not prepared to do anything from the sea until they had made their certainty even more certain. January 22 dawned bright and clear, but it brought no sea or air attacks at first light, as anticipated. The waters around New Britain remained clear of enemy shipping. The reason for this temporary reprieve soon became manifest.

At 6.30 a.m. the New Ireland coastwatchers, whose posts lay on the air route from Truk to Rabaul, began reporting large numbers of heavy bombers on the, by now, well worn south-westerly course to the latter. At 7.00 a.m. the first 18 bombers came into sight and, instead of making for their usual targets — the airfields — they swung out to the east over St. George's Channel and commenced a northerly run over Praed Point. They were out of range of the two 3" A.A. guns on Observatory Ridge at the head of the Harbour, and could carry out their pattern bombing at will. As they came over their target, Zero fighters flashed in and commenced low level strafing attacks on both Lakunai and Vunakanau airfields — just on the offchance that the defenders had some stray aircraft left which they might try to put into the air against the bombers.

### Waves of Bombers

As their 500 kilo. bombs crashed on the battery positions, the bombers swung away and swiftly headed north. They were nearly out of sight by the time the second wave of eighteen bombers came in on their run. The Japanese were taking their time, allowing the dust of the first series of explosions to settle before delivering the second instalment of bombs. And so, at spaced intervals, a third and fourth formation of eighteen bombers came in and rained destruction on the battery.

By this time the fighters had broken formation and were doing victory rolls and other aerobatics over the town and harbour — they had to fill in time in some way. Meanwhile, a twin-engined aircraft, obviously on reconnaissance duty, flew in a leisurely manner round the area with camera working overtime.

As the last of the heavy bombers left their target,

the battery reported one gun and crew destroyed, whilst the other gun was damaged, but only slightly, although several of the crew had been killed or wounded.

On the heels of this report come another that six single-engined aircraft had passed over the battery and swung round towards the town.

They were dive bombers, come to finish the work of the "heavies." The formation flew up the harbour and, when over the town and obscured from the battery by the thick 5,000 feet column of smoke arising from the volcano, Matupi, they commenced to peel off and dive down on the battery — the first two or three actually passing through the volcanic smoke and flashing down on to the battery before the few remaining defensive positions could get their machine guns to bear on the aircraft. No second attack by the dive bombers was needed — the remaining gun was blown right out of its mounting and even more completely wrecked than the first.

The reconnaissance aircraft lumbered back and forth over the remains of the battery and then accompanied by the fighters flew off in the wake of the dive bombers to the north.

During the remainder of January 22, the coast-watchers, in turn, reported the progress of the invasion fleet down the east coast of New Ireland. The landing commenced at 2 a.m. on January 23 and, 24 hours after the destruction of the battery had been completed, the little garrison had been overwhelmed and Rabaul was in Japanese hands.

What happened after that is another story.